

Postcards – The Tolerant Church

2/16/20

Revelation 2:12-17

Sunday AM

Several yrs ago, the fam went to a friend's house on Lake Rabun. One afternoon, Madeline and I decided to go kayaking – and it didn't go too well. I set the kayak in the water, but as I was getting in, I had one foot on the dock and one foot on the kayak – the next thing I know, the kayak went one way and my bottom went the other way – and I found myself compromised doing a split as I plunged into the lake.

Truth is that all too often, when we try to live w/ one foot in the world and one foot in the church, we too will find ourselves compromised and in trouble – **and this is the story of the church at Pergamum.**

Sadly, the church at Pergamum is symbolic of many churches/denominations today – compromised w/ one foot in the world and one in the Word. But this shouldn't surprise us when you consider the state of the church from the 4rd to 7th centuries. From the moment Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D., the church was invited into compromise. The church was merged w/ the Roman state and pagan priests suddenly became Christian priests, pagan temples became Christian churches, and pagan holidays became Christian festivals. The Christian faith was no longer a personal matter, but an expected national identity. **And so long as the Christian faith is normalized, it will wrestle w/ being nominalized.**

If you have your Bible, turn to **Rev. 2:12-17** and let's stand together to read God's Word this AM.

To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them w/ the sword of my mouth. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone w/ a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it. Rev. 2:12-17

We're in a series looking at the letters to the 7 churches in Revelation to help us learn **what to do** and **what not to do** as a church so we might be thrive on mission w/ God. As we turn to the Church at Pergamum, we find a church struggling to live in the world yet not be compromised by the world.

Regarding the background – the city of Pergamum was the capital city of Asia Minor located about 20 miles inland and 80 miles from Ephesus. The city was renowned for its politics, intellectual achievement, and pagan (emperor) worship. As such, it was a wealthy city given to luxury, education, and medicine. In particular, the city boasted two special features that caused Pergamum to stand out in its time. 1st the city was home to the 2nd largest library of antiquity behind the library in Alexandria – housing 200,000 vols. And the city was home (4) pagan temples dedicated to the gods of Greece along w/ at least (3) temples dedicated to the Emperors of Rome.

The **Temple of Asklepios** – god of healing/medicine is worth noting b/c this temple (*Mayo Clinic*) was filled w/ snakes. When a person sought healing, they'd lie on the floor and allow the snakes to crawl over them as a form of therapy – ***I think I'd rather die!***

It was in this climate the church at Pergamum was attempting to survive. It was a church who was doctrinally pure, yet culturally compromised – who felt the pressure to **tolerate** the world around them.

Tolerance has become a 50c word in our PC world inviting us to *accept* any rogue belief/behavior no matter the moral/cultural implications. In fact, in some circles, the minority expects the majority to embrace or turn a blind eye to behavior that deviates from truth or else they'll label others as intolerant.

Originally though, **tolerance** meant to recognize that others might have a differing belief and to accept that the person has a right to do so at their own expense. In this way, Christians are to be tolerant. But tolerance has come to mean accepting the beliefs/practices of others as true and that they should be normalized.

But there's a big difference b/w worldly tolerance and Biblical tolerance. Worldly tolerance says, *there are no rules. Truth is relative – so don't judge.* Biblical tolerance says, *truth is based in God's Word, and must be lived/shared w/ others w/ gentleness/respect.*

Meaning, at its root, tolerance isn't about accepting anything or turning a blind eye to right/wrong and good/evil. In fact, tolerance requires a standard of morality/conviction or else an *anything goes* mentality might destroy a society from the inside out. Thus, sometimes the most tolerant thing you can do is be intolerant of beliefs/behaviors detrimental to all.

So, *what is tolerance if it's not acceptance?* Tolerance is more about how you to treat people who disagree w/ you than it is embracing any sort of beliefs/behaviors. Tolerance is about being patient/gentle as we are firm w/ people w/ whom we absolutely disagree.

In **Ephesians 4:2**, Paul said to *have tolerance for one another in love.* Meaning, tolerance starts w/ God's love in us caring for others w/ a love that's patient, kind, and not self-centered – as **1 Corinthians 13** says.

Example – I can hold deeply to the belief that Jesus alone is Lord yet still be kind to a man who holds to a different religious conviction from me. What I can't do is compromise the truth in the process. I can accept the person w/out accepting their beliefs/behaviors.

Biblical tolerance is based on seeing others as God sees them – in need of grace. Such people (like ourselves) deserve and need compassion. When you see people this way, you can listen to them and treat them w/ openness/respect, even though you disagree w/ them. Biblical tolerance also allows you to share truth w/ gentleness/love. Focus on the Family

Question – How do we live in the world w/out being like the world. How do we minister Jesus effectively w/out accepting the sin/carnality around us as normal?

I **DEPEND** Fervently on the Word of God

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword...

If we're going to stand firm in our faith in a fallen world, it'll require that we have an unflinching trust and commitment to the holy Scriptures – God's Word.

Simply stated, God's Word must be our standard of truth. We must understand that it is the primary medium by which God communicates to us and into the circumstances of our lives.

In 2 Timothy 3, Paul said the Word is fully inspired by God and is beneficial as *doctrine* to guide us, *reproof* to confront us, *correction* to redirect us, and *training* to empower us. Even more, the writer of Hebrews says the Bible is a *surgeon's scalpel* to dissect the thoughts/intents of the heart. And yet, the Bible does even more than establish right/wrong and good/evil, it's also *a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path* – meaning it illuminates the pathway of our lives that we might walk w/ God and live out His Word/will.

So, if we're ever going to live uncompromised in this world, then it'll require that God's Word is the true standard in our lives by which everything is measured.

It'll mean that God's Word is the primary influence over our lives and the primary filter of every decision we make w/ regard to right/wrong and good/evil.

Question: Do you live in the world and visit the Word – or will you live in the Word and visit the world?

II **DEVOTE** Yourself to Following Christ

I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives...

I know where you live – it is as if the H.S. is echoing to us what was once said at Pergamum. I know the state of the culture where you've been called to thrive – it's stationed in the heart of worldly ideals and experiences – where Satan has his throne

Pergamum was the epitome of the world system w/ everyone living for themselves and indulging in every sort of sin/debauchery w/ no sense of remorse. It was a society abandoned to self-gratification/greed. Pergamum was as worldly of a city as any in history.

Sadly, we now live in a world where worldliness rules the day and where a person's preoccupation of their appetites have become an excuse to fuel their actions, attitudes, and ambitions w/out any regard for others.

Worldliness is any preoccupation w/ or interest in the temporal system of life that places anything perishable before that which is eternal. *MacArthur*

Don't miss this – No matter the climate of the culture the calling of the church hasn't changed – we're to be salt/light – and the hands, feet, and voice of God to the world in which we live w/out becoming like it.

But this can't happen if we become of this world. Yes, we must live in this world, but we're not supposed to become like this world. We cannot forget that when we receive Christ as Savior, our citizenship changed.

Colossians 1:13-14 says we're no longer citizens of earth, but now, b/c of the declaration of God, we're citizens of heaven– imbued w/ a new purpose authored by God – and that is to follow/serve Christ.

At salvation, we become strangers passing thru w/ a mission to be Jesus to the people God brings into our lives. To succeed in our new life, we must live in God's truth daily and follow Him in an abiding life by putting ourselves under the influence of the H.S.

III **DISTANCE** Yourself from False Teaching

Pergamum – means *married* inferring *being one w/*

Earlier in John's ministry, he warned the church about this issue – *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.* 1 John 2:15-17

In looking at what Jesus points out to the church at Pergamum, we discover a church who'd fallen into a state of compromise w/ the world around them. This church was holding onto sound doctrine w/ one hand but w/ the other hand, they had a tight grip on the world. **They were unequally yoked w/ unbelievers and Jesus confronted them about it.**

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans...

W/out question, the story of Balaam is one of the strangest stories in the Bible – if you remember, God confronted Balaam thru his donkey b/c he was moving in a direction displeasing to God. Yet lest we forget, Balaam was a man intimately acquainted w/ God, yet he was a prophet for hire. While He knew God and spoke w/ God, Balaam was motivated by greed and was guilty of leading Israel into immorality/idolatry.

If you want to read his story, you can find it in **Numbers 22-25**. In those verses, Balak, the king of Moab, wanted to curse Israel, so he asked Balaam to curse Israel in exchange for power/wealth. 4x's Balaam tried to curse Israel, but each time, the Lord turned his curses into blessings. When he finally realized his attempts had failed, Balaam decided that if he couldn't curse Israel, then he'd try to corrupt them by teaching Balak how to put a stumbling block before them so they would eat things sacrificed to idols and commit acts of immorality – and he succeeded.

So, the **teaching of Balaam** is a reference to living deceived luring others into wickedness/worldliness.

B/c the church at Pergamum was tolerating people in their midst who claimed to be Christians, but who lived like the world around them, they were guilty of the **sin of Balaam**. Apparently, many of them believed they could attend pagan feasts, engage in the behavior of pagans, and then come to church and worship God as if nothing had ever happened – yet Jesus was clear, **friendship w/ the world is hostility towards God**.

The other false teaching involved a NT challenge – the **Nicolaitans**. Little is known about this heresy, but due to the context, it can be surmised that this group had also perverted the teachings of Christ to lead people into thinking it was okay to participate in the behavior of the pagan world that's seeking to seduce the church into immorality/idolatry.

So, Jesus beckons the church to distance themselves from such teachings/actions. It's as if Jesus was saying – While Christians must live in the world, the world should not (and must not) live in the Christian.

This reminds me of the story of the little girl who said to her mother – *I know why flowers grow... b/c they want to get out of the dirt!*

As children of God, if we're going to thrive, it'll require that we live above the dirt. And just as it is w/ flowers that require the sun – we too require the SON!

There's one final thing we must do to thrive in a fallen world constantly seeking to stuff us into its mold...

IV **DAILY** Return to the Source of Joy

Repent therefore!

While **repent** first and foremost means *to turn from or change directions from sin to God* – it also includes making a return.

Truth is there's no one who's perfect – and no one who walks perfectly in the Lord apart from the H.S. Thus, each and every day, to start the day, thru-out the day, and to conclude the day, we should intentionally look to the Source of our life and the source of our joy.

As I've said on many occasions, *it is impossible to live a life pleasing to God independent of the H.S.* No matter how noble or well-intended – for the Christian life to work, it has to abide under the direct influence of the H.S.

Thus, thru-out our days, we need to reflect upon and consider whether we're walking in the Spirit or living the pseudo-Christian life in the flesh. Constantly, we should be evaluating to ensure that Jesus is sitting on the throne of our lives – and if somewhere during the day we pushed Him off for our own will to be fulfilled, we need to step back, step off, and allow the Son to be once again enthroned.

Which brings me back to my kayaking failure. Yes, there will be times when we find ourselves w/ one foot in the world and one foot in the Word. There just might be those awkward spiritual moments when it appears, we're doing splits and headed for the drink. But praise be to God that even in failure, we can turn our hearts and our lives towards the cross – and the Savior will be there w/ open arms ready to restore us to the joy of our salvation and a willing Spirit to sustain us.

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